

Sacred tradition unites young and old

By Kirsten Fiscus, Star Staff Writer, kfiscus@annistonstar.com | Posted: Monday, September 7, 2015 8:00 pm

TALLADEGA NATIONAL FOREST — Deep in the woods near Cleburne County 61, a dirt-and- gravel road leads to a clearing just big enough to fit about 25 vehicles, a pavilion with seating for at least 50, and a 120-year-old church.

Some 60 worshippers gathered Monday in this place for an annual expression of their faith, a Sacred Harp singing at Shoal Creek Church. Their voices, bearing each note and word, overflowed the building through the open doors and windows and into the surrounding woods. Forest campers, on foot, on horseback and in cars, approached to discover the source of the joyful sound.

Sacred Harp, or shape note music, is a tradition that dates back to 1844 with deep roots in Georgia and Alabama, said Jesse P. Karlsberg, an Atlanta resident who has sung the style for 15 years.

“Sacred Harp singings are a community event where people kind of come together to sing Sacred Harp and we all take turns leading songs,” he said. “They’ve been held basically since the book came out, and held in this part of Alabama since at least the 1870s. Singings in this church have been going on since before a congregation stopped meeting here in 1914, so it has been happening here for quite some time.”

The music is presented as four shapes to make sight reading easier, according to Karlsberg. Singers sit in a hollow square, each of its sides designated for sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses, with a conductor in the middle, he said. The sound, directed inward, is a concert for the singers, not an audience. Many people raise and lower their hand to keep time but to also give praise to the music they make. The collective tapping of toes and heels on the hardwood floors adds a steady rhythm to the melody.

While the tradition of Sacred Harp is an old one, the age of the congregation is slowly becoming younger, according to Charlene Wallace, who has been involved with Sacred Harp for as long as she



Leading in tradition

Fallon Cook directs a song at a Sacred Harp singing on Labor Day at Shoal Creek Church in Cleburne county. The little log cabin church is located in rural Cleburne county in the Talladega National Forest. For more images, see Trent Penny's slideshow from Shoal Creek Church ([follow link from home page](#))

can remember.

“A lot of the older ones have passed on,” Wallace said. “We’ve got some younger ones that’s trying to learn, and there are a good many coming out of Atlanta to sing and we enjoy everybody that comes. Proud they do.”

Robert Chambliss, who has been singing in the Shoal Creek Church since 1971, when he started dating his wife, is encouraged by the number of younger people involved in the music.

“Most think it is a bunch of old fogies out here singing,” he said. “That just isn’t the case as much anymore.”

Nicholas Thompson, a freshman in college, is the only one in his immediate family who sings Sacred Harp, but learned it through his church in Fairview.

“I started singing in 2011 after I went to the singing at my church,” Thompson said. “I went one time and have been singing ever since.”

For many who attend, shape note singing has a very spiritual connection.

“It is one of the most spiritual experiences you can have,” Thompson said. “It is unlike anything I have ever heard in my life. Singing here is very rustic, and what it must have been like 100, 150 years ago to come to a singing.”

Karlsberg became interested in the tradition from a musical standpoint, but latched onto it for other reasons.

“As I’ve done it more, it really became a group of people that you really care to see and that care about you,” he said. “It makes you feel like you have a really big wonderful loving family from all over the world and all different walks of life.”

For some, Sacred Harp was and still is a family tradition.

“My mother and daddy sang,” Wallace said. “There were 11 of us, seven girls. The boys didn’t sing, but all of us girls did. I had a niece who would go every weekend with me.”

For all, the tradition of Sacred Harp leaves a lasting impression upon them.

“It is just something I enjoy singing and I like to go far, if I can get there,” Wallace said.

Thompson harnesses the weekend singings for the week ahead of him.

“You go singing on the weekend and it gives you the strength to face the rest of the week,” Thompson said. “You’ve been to a singing, you’ve got the music, and now you’ve got the strength to go into whatever the week holds.”

Karlsberg accepts Sacred Harp as a necessary staple in his life.

“I would say certainly for me, it is just kind of an important thing to have in my life,” he said. “I can have a tough week or feel like I need something and often Sacred Harp gives me that.”